

Morning of Fear

The history teacher's words receded into the background as the girl's thoughts wandered into the sunlight of the clear spring day. Her pencil doodled absently on the notebook paper, sketching the prom dress she wanted. Her mother was taking her shopping that night to buy everything she needed for the big dance. She glanced up at the classroom wall clock. Fifteen more minutes until the bell would ring. She rested her chin in her hands and formed a vision of Steve. Her cheeks felt flushed and a tingling sensation surged. Suddenly she became aware of the classroom, the other students, and the teacher's eyes noting her lack of attention.

His voice droned on, but Melina's excitement thwarted her concentration. Things were finally starting to go right, she thought. How did I let myself fall into the habit of skipping classes and neglecting my grades, she wondered? The move to America and entering such a large and impersonal public high school had been a difficult transition. The new environment brought out Melina's natural shyness and kept her isolated from the other students. They saw her as aloof and unfriendly and left her alone. She sensed their reticence to know her and withdrew further, slipping into a deep depression.

Because both her parents worked for the U.S. State Department teaching agricultural techniques to farmers in underdeveloped countries, Melina had grown up in third world countries and attended American foreign-service schools. The American schools she attended in those countries were small and intimate. Their common identity as Americans brought the students together in a close-knit community. Melina was comfortable in that kind of intimate environment. But now, in a school of 3000 students, she felt lost. These students seemed more foreign to her than the strange peoples of the foreign countries she had grown up in. Her shyness loomed around her like light years of space, threatening to crush her under its weight.

Although scholastically Melina far surpassed the other freshmen, school officials refused to place her in a higher grade because she'd never before attended schools in the U.S. Despite her petite stature and childish looks, Melina's maturity cleaved the bond she might have fond with students her own age. These students she felt were arrogant with self-absorption and worried little about studies. She felt a stranger to their concern with clothes and cars. They seemed ignorant of the world beyond their own neighborhoods, and resented her knowledge, experiences, and worldliness. Her isolation from her old world now overwhelmed and confused her. Always before she had friends, things to do and talk about. But here, things were so different. She had no one to discuss her music or art with, or her love of politics. Though more primitive, she longed for the simplicity of the world she'd grown up in. The students there weren't distracted by all the "things"—the cars, the clothes, the sex. More than anything, she missed the beauty of her books, her art, and her music. Somehow, they got lost here in the crush of humanity.

Melina reflected how she had sunk into a deep depression after coming here and how Claude always seemed to be around then, walking her to classes, and taking her places. Claude's attention comforted her. At the beginning, she liked being with him, but he started changing. He grew mean and bossy. His moods of anger became more frequent and she began to fear them. To make her do what he wanted, he'd slap or hit her. Melina knew her father didn't like Claude, and his displeasure bothered her. She trusted his instincts but he never made demands to his daughter. Several times Melina tried breaking up with Claude but he ignored her, persisted in seeing her, calling, and coming over to her house uninvited. She feared him and didn't know how to break away from his persistence.

Melina's parents felt more comfortable about this new boy, Steve. He, like her, was an honor student and loved music. He played a flute in the school band. She noticed him when she first came to this school and thought he seemed nice, but he was shy, like her, so they hadn't talked to each other. If they passed in the hall, he always smiled shyly at her, but that was all. Once he talked to her at lunch.

She hoped he would ask her to the football game that weekend, but he didn't. He seemed nervous and embarrassed while they talked. That's why she was surprised when, three weeks ago, he asked her to go to the Junior prom with him. She eagerly accepted, although she thought she made a fool of herself for accepting so quickly.

Apparently encouraged that she accepted, the following week Steve asked her to a movie for Saturday night. During the show they nervously held hands, but afterwards at the hamburger place the conversation gradually began to flow easily. After their first date, he waited for her at lunch times and ate with her. Melina was pleased to find that although he was shy, Steve was thoughtful and courteous. He was more like her father. They could discuss all the things that were important to her. Steve knew about politics and what was happening in the countries she had grown up in, even though he had never been there. How different from Claude, she thought.

The pencil point snapped when the ringing bell jarred her back to reality. I don't want thoughts of Claude mixed with happy thoughts of Steve, she told herself. I'm finished with Claude, she said to herself as she quickly gathered up her books and headed for the door. She felt relieved she had finally broken off their relationship. I don't want someone like him and it was a big mistake. I hope I see Steve, she thought as a smile bloomed on her face like a new spring bud.

Despite the dull lighting in the hall, Melina caught sight of the tall, lanky teen leaning against a locker door as she stepped out the classroom door. Quickly she shifted her course and headed in the opposite direction, stepping quickly down the hall. But she heard the clomp of Claude's heavy shoes coming fast up behind her.

"Hey, what's the idea?" his words spit out between clenched teeth as he grabbed her left arm. She nearly dropped the books she was clutching to her chest. She stopped abruptly, but purposely avoided looking at his face. She spoke softly, yet firmly, for him to leave her alone.

"Hey, you aren't walking off and leaving me. You're coming with me—now," his dark eyes squinted at her as he pulled at her to start moving.

"Claude, let go," she struggled against his grip. "I told you—I can't see you anymore. My Dad—he said—"

"That's a lie. You tell me that again and you'll wish you never said it." The boy's oily black hair tumbled into his face as he shoved her thin frame against the wall. His long, thick fingers wrapped around her upper arm like a viper, squeezing hard into her flesh. A bead of sweat trickling from her arm pit and rolled down her side. Though the hall bustled with students, they seemed oblivious to her crisis as they rushed to their classes. Melina anxiously searched the rushing crowd for a familiar face, but she hadn't yet made many friends and didn't see anyone she knew.

"Come on. Take a walk with me. I wanna talk to you—then—then you can go." Claude's tight grip eased a bit but he kept his eyes firmly on her flushed face. Her eyes raised slowly to look at him and quickly darted away. A shutter passed through her when she saw the wrinkled hardness of his stiffened upper lip. Though he was barely sixteen, she thought his face bore the hardened callousness of someone much older.

"OK, Claude, but only just a minute. I can't miss any more classes," she answered, a fever of fear rising in her voice. She sensed it was better to quickly appease him than to resist. Claude continued to yank at her arm as he guided her down the musty corridor. They walked at a hurried pace without talking until they reached the door and stepped outside. On the steps the girl stopped and stood resolute. Avoiding his angry stare, she spoke.

"OK, what do you want. Just tell me right here." She clutched at her school books with both arms, resisting his grip, and brought the books tighter against her chest. Claude released her arm with a jerk. His deep-set, dark eyes riveted on her and he thought how he hated her, that long colorless hair—how it was

neither blond nor brown, and her plain gray eyes—not blue, and how much she looked like a small scared mouse, cornered and nervous. His irritation increased.

"I wanna see you again. I promise I won't hurt you anymore," the voice demanded, belying the pleading words.

"You said that before, Claude. I lied to my father about how I lost my front tooth, saying a baseball hit me, and before that I said I fell off my bike when I got all those bad bruises. I know he knows I lied, and he doesn't believe me anymore." She wanted to run back into the school, but her shoes seemed anchored to the cement.

"Didn't I just say I wouldn't hurt you again, huh, didn't I?" his eyes bore into her face like a torch. "Come on, be nice to me." His voice softened, but his face remained taugth and stiff. "Come over to my place for a while. Then you can go back to school. Come on, let's go." Without giving her a chance to respond, he took her arm again, firmly. Against her will, she went with him, fearing not to. She tried to stop herself, but fear made her keep walking, keeping her eyes on the ground.

"Why aren't you at work?" she asked hesitantly, not anxious to talk with him.

"I quit. The boss had it out for me. He's not gonna push me around." Melina wondered why he always lost his jobs. This was the fourth job since he quit school in January.

"Maybe you ought to go back to school and graduate, Claude." She tensed at his tightening grip.

"You think I don't know how to take care of myself? What do you know?"

"I didn't mean anything by it—please, don't squeeze my arm so hard."

"What are you afraid of, huh? I always take care of you, don't I? Wasn't I real nice to you when you first came here and you had no friends? Wasn't I?"

"Yes, Claude, you were very nice to me." Melina blinked hard and could only watch the cracks in the sidewalk. She heard her father say he didn't like that young fellow she's been hanging out with.

"Please, Claude—I—I have to get back to school now. I'm in too much trouble now."

"Hey, who cares if you're a little late to class. What a baby you are. You've got no guts—like a mouse."

"If I miss any more classes and don't bring up my grades, I can't be a sophomore next fall. I don't want to repeat all my classes. I don't want—" her small lips quivered as she spoke.

"See, we're almost there, you big baby. Come on. Someone's gotta take care of you all the time."

Melina's long hair swung loose around her small round face as she stared at her moving feet. Despite the chill of the clear May day, the heat of perspiration seeped into her clothes. Melina shivered. She felt the sting of guilt as she remembered how her father bought her a teddy bear when she lost her front tooth. She lied to him about it because she was afraid to tell the truth. She wasn't afraid of her father, but of what Claude would do if she told the truth.

She thought about her father comforting her when she was small and wanted him with her now. He would hold her close to him, carry her in his large arms, and tell her stories or sing to her so she wouldn't cry. He'd sing her favorite children's song, "The Itsy-Bitsy Spider," and play with her to make her smile again.

Claude released her arm to open the door of his house. He held open the door and she hesitated to enter the quiet house. He pulled her in. Melina's foot stumbled as she stepped over the threshold. She always felt uncomfortable in this tiny, disheveled house. Last night's dinner dishes were still strewn on the Formica dinette table, and the house smelled greasy. Piles of laundry littered the sofa and living-room chairs. Melina cringed at the messy sight.

"Come on in, little baby. No one's gonna hurt you cause no one's here." For the first time, Melina wished that Claude's parents were home.

"Let's go to my room and talk—"

"No, Claude—not—let's stay in the kitchen," Melina backed away toward the kitchen. She felt safer there. The kitchen was small, and she wanted to stand close to the door. He quickly stepped in front of her and grabbed her arm, still tightly clutching her books. He pushed her toward his room. In the room, he shoved her onto the unmade bed. Her books tumbled around her onto the bed. She quickly jumped up and cried, "No, Claude, I don't want to—"

"Hush up, baby. I'm gonna show you how nice I am." He kicked the door shut behind him. Holding onto her arm, he poked at the two soiled pillows, punching them against the plastic headboard. The sheets, haphazardly tossed over the mattress, bore darkened stains of body oils and sweat and smelled of a mixture of cologne and body odors.

"Come on, Melina, sit here—see it's real comfy." While patting the pillows, he pushed her against them. She watched him without expression. She slid stiffly against the pillows, drawing her legs up close to her chest, tugging her skirt completely over them, and wrapped her arms around her legs. The messy, clothes-strewn room felt suffocating. She disliked the discordant colors, patterns and prints of the bed covering and sheets. Nothing matched and everything showed months of wear without cleaning. Though she'd been here before, she wondered why. The room always felt unfriendly and offended her sense of civility. She squeezed her eyes shut to the untidy view and the finger-smudged walls, fighting her fear and urge to flee. Her eyes opened with a start when he yanked her chin, pulling his face close to hers, kissing her. Melina stiffened her lips and turned her head to the side, jerking her lips out of reach.

"You little—" he broke off, glaring at her, and yanked his hand away. He sat on the edge of the bed and a cold smile pushed at his lips. Suddenly he announced, almost hospitably, "I'll get you something to drink."

"No—nothing please—I have to get back to school," she said breathlessly. What am I doing here, she silently chastised herself. She cringed at the thought of lingering there any longer and tightened her arms around her knees.

"You think you're better than me, huh? You think you're so smart just 'cause you've been places and know things, and you've got such a smart daddy, huh?" his eyes narrowed and his upper lip curled up to one side, exposing his teeth.

"No, Claude, I don't—"

"You always think you're better than us 'cause you were raised in foreign places."

"Why do you always say that? You don't know what you're talking about. It was tough growing up in places like Bangladesh." Regret strangled in her throat for ever wanting to come to the U.S. and finish school here. She swallowed back the urge to cry and dropped her head to her knees.

"How come you've got no friends, smarty? Maybe you should just stay with daddy. You and he can paint pictures together and play your music and—"

She jerked her head up.

"Leave my father alone, he's done nothing to you. He's worked very hard all his life and tried to help very poor people. You have no right to talk so against him." She dropped her head again to her knees to hide the tears rushing into her eyes. She felt trapped and wanted her father to tell her everything was all right.

"OK, forget it, little baby. You gonna go to the prom with that wimpy boy?"

Melina raised her head slowly, "Y-yes, what of it?" The words choked in her throat. Something squeezed her heart making more sweat run down her side.

Claude's hand darted out, shoving her hard against the pillows and headboard. His breathing grew heavy and his upper lip tensed in that awful way she dreaded. She caught her breath and froze, not daring to move. He glared at her for a moment, she dared not look away. He suddenly released her and jumped off the bed. As he dashed out the bedroom door, he stopped and turned his head and shouted back at her, "You wait right there and don't move—I'm coming right back. Don't you move." He left the room briefly, returning with a shiny, slender rifle hanging at his side.

Melina's face drained of blood, the room suddenly felt chilled.

"What's the matter? You never seen a gun before, little baby?" He sat down again on the bed opposite her at the foot, laying the rifle down carefully beside him on the crumpled bedcovers.

"Now you're gonna make Claude feel good. Take your clothes off," he snapped, keeping his hand menacingly on the rifle.

Melina's pulse hammered in her throat and a curtain of icy sweat glazed over her body. She glanced towards the window. It was shut. She wanted to scream out for her father. Despite her efforts to stop them, tears rolled down her cheeks. Her arms dropped to the side of her legs as she made a motion to get up, but Claude caught the motion and yelled.

"Take em off, little baby. Hurry it up. Why don't you cry for that wimp you're going to go to the prom with, huh? Well, I'll make you remember who made you feel good when you first came here. Go on, take em off." He lunged forward and sat up on his knees watching her every move.

She slowly fidgeted with the buttons on her blouse, hoping time would give her a chance to run. He seemed to enjoy her suffering the way young boys gleefully pull off the legs of small insects. He sat rigid with a thin, ominous smile.

"Please, Claude, let's not—"

"Stop stalling. You're gonna make up for all the bad stuff you've done to me."

Melina slipped her blouse off and began undoing her skirt when Claude shot up suddenly and began ripping her clothes off. Melina struggled, but felt his oppressive weight and strength no match for her own. She cried out for him to stop. But his excitement increased the more she resisted. She was snared under his weight like a small animal in a trap. As he mounted her he taunted her, "Why don't you think of him, huh? Pretend I'm him, you slut." His large hands pinned down her arms as he straddled her. She fought vainly against his thrusting pleasure and brute strength. She closed her eyes against the onslaught of terror, crying out and sobbing uncontrollably.

After he finished his pleasure, he slapped her face so hard her ear rang. The side of her face burned with the force of the blow and she gasped for breath. As he backed off of her, she gagged to smell the sweat of his body.

Claude ordered her to dress as he shoved his legs into his jeans.

"Get your clothes on. I'm not gonna have to dress you—go on, get dressed."

Swiftly, she gathered up her clothes and put them on, sobbing and shaking so hard she barely managed to button her blouse. "Can I go now?" she asked in a soft, shaking voice, fearing to look at him.

"Just sit there, right where you were. Sit up against those pillows again" He zipped up his jeans and resumed his place on the bed across from her, placing his hand once more on the rifle.

"Let's hear you say you love me." He glared at her, picking up the rifle with his right hand.

"Oh, God—w-what are you going to do?"

"You think you can leave me, but you can't. You aren't going anywhere. Tell me you love me," he yelled, leaning forward enough to touch the barrel of the gun to her forehead. Melina felt a black flush rush through her eyes. She felt faint.

"Claude—you're scaring me! You're just kidding—aren't you? P-put the gun down." Tears streamed down her pale skin. She pleaded with him to drop the gun.

"OK, little baby, and what if I let you go? Huh? You'll just go running to that little punk. I told you, you aren't gonna leave me."

"Claude, no—w-what—they'll know you—" She closed her eyes and tried denying the reality of the hatred she saw in him.

"Hey, scaredy, I got it all figured out. I'm not so dumb like you think," his voice sounded strangely jocular, and Melina tried to believe he was just trying to scare her and would let her go. Suddenly she felt the force of the gun's tip shove harder against her skull and he growled through clenched teeth, "Tell me you love me, bitch, or go to kingdom come."

"N-no—please don't—" Now her eyes never strayed from his face, searching for a sign of hope that he would put the gun down and let her go. She realized suddenly that her hair was soaked with sweat. His eyes became slits as he glared hatefully at her. Trembling uncontrollably, Melina began mumbling the words of a child's song like a mantra. Her eyes lost focus and she cried out, almost imperceptibly, "Daddy!"

Claude became enraged and squeezed the trigger, sending a bullet speeding down the barrel. Melina slumped immediately to the bed. He looked at her, an imperceptible grin flickering at the edge of his mouth. He calmly left the room and went to the kitchen phone and dialed 911.

"Hello, you better send an ambulance—quick—my girlfriend, she just shot herself. A suicide." He gave the address and returned to the bedroom. Carefully he wiped off his finger prints and arranged the gun by Melina's side with her lifeless hands. He sat down and waited for the ambulance.